

Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle Revisited

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Abstract

Ukraine has long been considered as a bone of contention between the EU and Russia which could eventually lead to a geographical split of the country. This interpretation, however, fails to explain the dynamic of the Ukrainian revolution and Russian–Ukrainian war. To address the deadlock in understanding the mixed dynamics of the situation in Ukraine, the article argues that the relations in the EU–Ukraine–Russia triangle are affected by the combination of choices that the Ukrainian political class, business elites and broader society make in four major dimensions: internal political practices; economic dimension; a dimension of international politics; and an ideological dimension.

UKRAINE HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY DESCRIBED AS AN APPLE OF DISCORD, bone of contention and root of disagreement between Russia and the European Union (EU). To some extent this interpretation of the study of the EU–Ukraine–Russia triangle resonates with general studies which construe EU–Russia interactions as reflecting a clash of various irreconcilable dichotomies (Emerson 2001): between a post-modern EU and a modern, or even pre-modern, Russia (Cooper 2011); between an EU integrationist vision and the Russian geopolitical mentality (Gomart 2006). In this kind of analysis Ukraine is reduced to a mere object of Russia–EU competition. However insightful and empirically rich it may be, this approach cannot explain Ukraine’s predicament in making a geopolitical choice between Russia and the EU. If Russia and the EU had engaged in some sort of fundamental conflict over Ukraine, the latter would have become a battleground for a fierce competition and would have been torn apart by the two actors into a pro-European Ukrainian part and a pro-Moscow Russian-speaking part. Some might argue that Russia’s annexation of Crimea and unrest in the east of Ukraine are examples of the manifestation of the conflict between pro-European Ukrainians and pro-Moscow Russophones. However, this kind of interpretation cannot explain the fact that the Maidan activists in November 2013 included both anti-European ultranationalist groups and a predominantly Russian-speaking population of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and other regions. It also fails to explain why the Russophone population in the south and some eastern regions of Ukraine strongly supports the European trajectory of Ukraine and opposes the separatist movement.

The *problématique* above suggests that Russia–EU interaction in the shared neighbourhood features a dynamic which is more complex than a mere ideological or geopolitical

competition. Some attempts to problematise the above reductionism from the institutionalist and constructivist standpoints were made by Haukkala (2001, 2008) and Prozorov (2006). Attributing the same ‘integrationist’ and ‘sovereign’ features to Russia and the EU, Prozorov explains both the cases of collaboration and of conflict in Russia–EU interactions. This trend has recently been applied in the research on the Black Sea region in which some authors have problematised the imperial paradigm and the representation of Russia as a barbarian, imperial ‘other’ from the West (Ciută 2007, 2008). Others acknowledge that it was the EU that was inconsistent in its policies in the region (Delcour 2010; Nitoiu 2011), and reluctant to engage Russia in EU policies for the region (Najšlová 2010). They also point to the need for the EU to engage Russia in joint actions (German 2007). Other authors challenge the ‘conflictual’ paradigm, by pointing to numerous examples of EU–Russia cooperative behaviour in the post-Soviet space, their cooperation in conflict resolution (Hill 2012), or in justice and home affairs (Potemkina 2010).

Drawing on the above critique this article suggests that the regional projects of Russia and the EU in the shared neighbourhood and Ukraine’s predicament with its geopolitical choice should be studied at the sub-unit level of analysis. To conduct such an analysis this article applies Luk van Langenhove’s conceptualisation of regions as projects, made up of sets of social actors, and aimed at organising society on different dimensions such as the political, the economic and the social (van Langenhove 2003, 2011). Applying van Langenhove’s conceptualisation, this article holds that there are three significant social actors: government, society and business elites. Since the three actors often have divergent interests or motives for action, it is suggested that the states should not be construed as a rational system and the state’s regional orientations should be treated as outcomes of the balance of preferences and practices between the three actors rather than a rational choice.

Within the same logic the article argues that the interests of these actors can be different in different dimensions: the social, the political and the economic. This will usher in different balances of preferences in various dimensions. Therefore, this article will examine relations in the EU–Ukraine–Russia triangle across four major dimensions of societal interaction: internal political practices; the economic dimension; the social–ideological dimension; and international security politics, which is an important indicator of regional alignments in Ukraine. The article will analyse each dimension and will identify in which of them the preferences of main actors generate a zero-sum logic. For the purpose of this research, the phrasing ‘zero-sum dynamics’ implies that both the EU and Russia pursue their own objectives, which are to a great extent mutually exclusive or even antagonistic. In the framework of this ‘zero-sum logic’, the future of Ukraine was framed as a dichotomy: either with Europe or with Russia.

Slicing the EU–Ukraine–Russia triangle

Until recently relations in the EU–Ukraine–Russia triangle were depicted as a more or less homogenous complex of zero-sum dynamics. In particular, the following four arguments have been widely acknowledged.

Firstly, in the dimension of internal political practices, each of the actors is trying to introduce in Ukraine those political practices which correspond to their values, visions or interests. Thus, the EU seeks to encourage Ukraine to pursue transparent democratic

procedures and respect human rights whereas Russia tries to implement its own sovereign democracy model. The models were considered antagonistic and generated zero-sum dynamics for Ukraine's choice.

Secondly, in the economic dimension each of the two actors are trying to open Ukrainian markets for their economic agents and to create more favourable conditions for trans-border trade with Ukraine and economic activities in Ukraine through the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) or through the Customs Union. These were mutually exclusive and, thus, Ukraine's choice between the two projects was seen in zero-sum terms.

Thirdly, in the dimension of foreign policy and international security architecture, the EU and Russia seek to involve Ukraine in their security projects—the EU is seeking Ukraine's alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions and its participation in various Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, with possible formal NATO membership, whereas Russia is seeking to involve Ukraine both in integration processes in the post-Soviet space, in particular to Eurasian Union and Russia-led European security architecture or, at least, to secure its neutrality. Given Russia's sensitivity about Ukraine's accession to NATO, the dilemma was also framed in zero-sum terms.

Fourthly, in the ideological dimension both Russia and the EU offer Ukraine their respective ideology and their particular perception of history. Russia's ideology has been developed in recent times through the appreciation of its unique national character and extreme experiences, which are regarded as justifying Russia's right to seek its own unique way to become 'a normal' European country. Thus, Russia offers Ukraine an ideology based on glorification of their common Soviet and pre-Soviet past with all its advantages and disadvantages. The EU, in turn, offers Ukraine its own post-modern understanding of Europe based on human rights, freedoms and liberties which make the EU a sort of teleological point of the development of any human society. At the same time, rejection of its Soviet past and history, focusing on its trauma and promotion of Ukrainian language, seem to be important elements of Ukraine's modern nation-building programme and return to Europe. It was suggested that the two programmes were antagonistic and defined Ukraine's choice in zero-sum terms.

The article will analyse each of the above dimensions and identify the preferences of the three main societal actors in Ukraine: the government, business elites and the population. The analysis of the balance of preferences of the three actors will help account for the dynamics of the relations in the triangle. In addition to a more refined analysis, this approach allows the attribution a certain degree of agency to Ukraine. This agency is clearly exercised when the interests and motivations of two of the three major societal actors coincide and lead to shaping a certain policy choice. Quite often such a choice is neither explicitly pro-European nor pro-Western, which demonstrates Ukraine's ability to diminish zero-sum dynamics in the triangle.

The article also analyses the changes in the interests of the EU and Russia across different dimensions. The balance of preferences will demonstrate where zero-sum dynamics prevails, that is where the interests of the EU and Russia are likely to remain irreconcilable, and where different dynamics can be identified. Overall, the article will also examine how the changes in the dynamics within one dimension affect its interface with other dimensions.

The dimension of the internal political practices: EuroMaidan or revolution of dignity

The dominant narrative of the last year's events in Ukraine argues that the pro-European democratically minded Ukrainian public rallied against authoritarian President Viktor Yanukovich after he refused to sign the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement in November 2013.¹ The Ukrainian revolution, often branded as EuroMaidan,² is described as a civilisational choice of the Ukrainians for democratic European values and against authoritarian Russia. Indeed, Ukrainian elites constructed a strong link between the nation's renaissance and its historical return to Europe, on the one hand, and the country's associations with the EU, on the other. Drawing on this link, the EU could build up strong moral authority in Ukrainian politics. Even with its weak conditionality, the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement was an important instrument in this debate. In addition, the strong response of the EU to politically motivated criminal processes against the leaders of the opposition resonated with the demand of the society and added additional significance to the political debate in the period 2011–2013. As a result, this internal debate was gradually reframed from a purely government–opposition conflict into a broader discourse about Ukraine's return to Europe. All this made the soft power of the EU stronger and provided it with some leverage in Ukrainian politics.

The role of the EU in the Ukrainian protests between November 2013 and February 2014 should not, however, be overestimated. The rallies in support of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement organised by pro-European intelligentsia and opposition parties on the eve of the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit gathered about between 50,000 and 70,000 people in Kyiv. However, although these rallies were big, they did not lead to mass mobilisation and the radicalisation of protests, and a week later they began to die down. The mass mobilisation and violent protests that eventually led to the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich took place after the night of 30 November, when the riot police brutally dispersed a small number of students and some journalists who decided to spend the night in Independence Square. The acts of unmotivated violence by the Ukrainian riot police were broadcast widely and triggered the mass mobilisation of Kyiv residents and an inflow of protestors from other cities. The main slogan of the second wave of protests, 'we won't let these bandits kill our children', had nothing to do with the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The protests, which were re-branded from the EuroMaidan into the 'Revolution of Dignity', brought together the broadest spectrum of social and political forces, from extreme Ukrainian nationalists with their anti-European slogans to some religious communities and Russian-speaking retired army officers. Thus, the Ukrainian democratic revolution was more against the Yanukovich government than for the association with the EU. It was a part of another significant trend in Ukrainian politics that can be explained in the broader framework of Yanukovich's authoritarian project.

¹ The EU–Ukraine Association Agreement was offered by the EU to Ukraine to replace the old Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. With the provisions for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, the Association Agreement stipulated progressive removal of customs tariffs and quotas in bilateral trade, harmonisation of laws and accession of Ukraine to various EU-funded programmes.

² The first rallies organised by the Ukrainian pro-European activists proclaimed the goal, not to oppose but to support President Viktor Yanukovich to sign the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. They were therefore called Euromaidan. See 'Evromaidan v Kieve: Deni pervyi', *Liga.net*, 22 November 2013, available at: http://news.liga.net/articles/politics/927589-nochnaya_khronika_evromaydan_den_pervyy.htm, accessed 15 August 2015. The first twitter account reporting the developments in the Ukrainian Independence Square was named Euromaidan, available at: <https://twitter.com/euromaidan>, accessed 15 August 2015. The pro-European symbols were quickly 'commodified' by local artists and entrepreneurs (Trach 2013).

Having taken office, President Yanukovich tried to replicate political practices from Russia, for example, by concentrating executive power in his hands, substituting democratic procedures with imitations, simulating public competition with pre-selected sparring partners rather than with real opposition, and by exerting pressure on society, the media and business sectors (Wilson 2005). One could add here several observations about general post-Orange apathy, the weakness of civil society in Ukraine (D'Anieri 2011), and the weak social basis of pro-Western NGOs in the country to draw pessimistic conclusions about the future of the country (Lutsevych 2013). Nevertheless the replication of the Russian model of governance in Ukraine did not produce analogous societal and political outcomes. On the contrary, the combination of a number of internal and external structural factors produced the opposite effect. Even well before the EU Summit with the countries of the Eastern Partnership in Vilnius on 21 November 2013, where Yanukovich was expected but refused to sign the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, popular resentment against his government and tension in his elite base had grown significantly. The next section will consider crucial factors which played an important role in the launch of ‘authoritarian projects’ and will assess and compare parallels between Russian authoritarianism and its Ukrainian replica.

Russian model in Ukraine: economic basis, government and population

In 2001 and 2002, Vladimir Putin started the implementation of an authoritarian regime combined with progressive economic reforms and deregulation of small and medium businesses (Åslund 2008). These measures, in combination with growing inflow of petrodollars, helped the Russian president to buy the loyalty of the population. The war against the Chechen rebels and general disappointment with the West were also a plausible excuse for the gradual limitation of the public sphere. Unlike his Russian prototype, Yanukovich took office in conditions of global economic crisis, with Ukrainian industries negatively affected by the drop in the demand for Ukrainian metals and chemical products on the world markets. This external condition drove the Ukrainian government to introduce serious austerity measures and reforms aimed at optimising budgetary spending and facilitating economic growth.

The problem was that these reforms went against populist electoral promises by Yanukovich. Instead of reducing tax, the new taxation code increased the tax-burden and posed arbitrary economic pressure on small and medium enterprises. Instead of raising pensions the government raised the retirement age. With all these changes taking place in the context of several scandals concerning the embezzlement of public funds in energy and infrastructure projects and exuberant expenses being paid for the president’s residences, a reconciliation gradually took place in Ukraine between areas that had once been divided across geographical lines (East against West), as the country became more united through its rejection of Yanukovich’s policies (Dymov 2012). In this rejection Ukrainian society produced two waves of mass social protests: the ‘Entrepreneurial Maidan’ (involving small traders’ protests in autumn 2010); and the ‘Maidan of Afghan War Veterans’ (in autumn 2011).³

The two Maidans indicated new trends in Ukrainian society. First, the imaginary geographical divide between East and West or between Russophone and Ukrainians is

³ Maidan (Market or Central Square) is widely used to connote the Orange Revolution protests which took place in the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square in Kyiv). The fact that subsequent protests of 2010, 2011 were also named ‘maidans’ demonstrates the significance that Ukrainians attach to these events.

gradually being substituted by a discourse of clashes between ‘normal’ people regardless of their language and ‘bandits’ power’ (Levus 2013; Sverstiuk 2014). It is indicative that the movement of Afghan War Veterans has its social base in Eastern Ukraine, including Yanukovich’s stronghold in the Donetsk region. It cannot be claimed that the entire population has totally rejected radical nationalist ideology (either ethnic Ukrainian nationalism or pro-Soviet or Russian leftism), but the dominant discourse in society has turned towards ideals of social redistributive justice or neo-liberal economic policies for everyone (Gatskova 2013).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the implementation of the Russian authoritarian model in Ukraine lacked the necessary economic basis and, consequently, produced the opposite effect, the mobilisation of the population and a broader societal demand for redistributive justice. Unlike the ‘idealist civil society of intelligentsia’ or Western-funded NGOs, which, despite their noble goals, have a weak social basis, the protests by small traders and retired paratroopers were the result of a genuine bottom-up drive, which started to overcome what David Lane defined as the main negative consequence of coloured revolution, a confrontational and destructive paradigm (2009). However materialistic their motives—the veterans of the Soviet–Afghan war demanded that they keep their high pension rates and traders rallied for keeping their tax exemptions—these movements have a broad social basis, nationwide membership and self-sufficiency.

Relations between government and elites

Another factor that affected the Russian authoritarian model in Ukraine was the character of relations between the government, on the one hand, and the parliamentary institutions and business elites on the other. After the *Duma* election in 1999, Vladimir Putin could rely on a significant pro-presidential majority in the Russian parliament. Apart from the Communist party and small centrist and centre-right factions, there was almost no noticeable meaningful liberal parliamentary opposition. Therefore, the implementation of administrative centralisation in Russia took place in more favourable conditions.

In the case of Ukraine, President Yanukovich started political centralisation when the Ukrainian Parliament contained significant opposition factions. However compromised by the post-Orange period, the Parliament remained an important national site for political debate, in particular, in view of the controversial policies of the new government. The disappointment and the demand for new political forces was demonstrated by the success of two new parliamentary parties: *Udar* (a centrist opposition party led by former World Heavyweight Champion boxer Vitaliy Klychko) and the Ukrainian nationalist party *Svoboda*. According to sociologists, Klychko owed his popularity to the fact that he has never been a professional politician (Mishchenko 2012a); whereas the success of radicals from *Svoboda* demonstrates voters’ preferences for consistent and value-based parties. All the opposition parties seem to have realised the great potential of non-partisan civil society and started working closely with its most active representatives to forge alliances.

Finally, unlike Russia, the smaller size of the Ukrainian economy and fewer lucrative business assets did not allow the Ukrainian president to secure an advantageous role in interaction with business elites similar to that which Vladimir Putin assumed in Russia. In addition, the strong business interests of the president’s family raised concerns among major business players about their future (Leshchenko 2013). Over the period 2010–2011, only two oligarchs (Renat Akhmetov and Dmytro Firtash) out of nine major industrialists represented

in the first Yanukovich government maintained their representation in top executive positions (Åslund 2008). Some experts believe that no oligarch, including those who keep a low profile, could feel safe after the way the former nationalist prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, was treated under Yanukovich (Shevchenko 2013). Some of them moved their assets to Europe from where they continued to support some opposition movements. Even major industrialists from Ukraine's industrial east, who had been long-time sponsors of the Party of the Regions (*Partia Regioniv*), allocated additional funds to the local branches of Tymoshenko's Bloc (*Blok Yulii Tyoshenko*), *Udar*, extreme nationalist party Freedom (*Svoboda*) and other political parties. As a result of the growing tension between Yanukovich and big business, several oligarchs, including his close associate Sergiy Lyovochkin, withdrew their support from Yanukovich at the peak of the protests. They also helped to secure a peaceful transition of power, after Viktor Yanukovich fled the country on 21 February 2014.

Russia, EU and the Ukrainian democracy

The argument concerning Russia's resentment about the coloured revolutions suggests both that Moscow treated the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet states as a Western geopolitical plot and, therefore, tried to counter this plot by exporting authoritarian models to these countries (Howarth 2011). The deterioration of relations between Russia and the democracies resulting from coloured revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 until 2008 seems to confirm this interpretation. At the same time, the claim that Russia builds special relationships with post-Soviet countries on the basis of ideological affinity and promotes authoritarianism is not entirely valid for several reasons. Firstly, Russia has never opposed the democratic revolutions *per se*. In Georgia, in 2003, Russia even played a positive role in the Georgian Rose Revolution. It facilitated the removal of the incumbent President Shevardnadze and the consolidation of the new government headed by Mikheil Saakashvili. In Kyrgyzstan, Russia supported President Kurmanbek Bakiyev for two years, and only withdrew its support when it became clear that these democratic leaders were trying to outbalance Russia's influence in their republics through closer alliance with the West (Marat 2010). For the same reason, in the case of Ukraine, leading Kremlin spin-doctor Gleb Pavlovskii acknowledged that Russia opposed the democratic leader Viktor Yushchenko mostly because it suspected him of strong anti-Russian sentiments and close ties with the USA.⁴ Therefore, the major factor that affects Russia's attitude to democratic revolutions is not the revolution *per se* but the perceived ideology behind this revolution and the geopolitical orientation that it can bring.

Moreover, its own authoritarianism notwithstanding, Moscow can more effectively project its influence and expand its economic presence in democratic societies rather than in autocratic systems. In the case of Ukraine, Moscow realised that it secured better economic deals under pro-Western Orange governments, rather than under the fraternal pro-Russian Party of the Regions. Yulia Tymoshenko had signed a highly profitable for Gazprom gas contract in 2009. She was subsequently convicted for this under 'pro-Russian' President Yanukovich who tried to re-negotiate the contract. When Moscow refused to reconsider the conditions of the gas deal, Viktor Yanukovich exercised pressure on several Russian energy companies (Milov 2011), to

⁴ 'Gleb Pavlovskii: Yushchenko Nevzluubili v Rossi eshe ranshe chem polyubili Yanukovicha', *Izvestia*, 1 November 2004.

demonstrate that Ukraine could also manipulate Russian–Ukrainian energy interdependence. Similarly, in Belarus and Central Asia, pro-Russian authoritarian leaders became even less comfortable interlocutors for Moscow than the pro-Western nationalist leaders in Ukraine. As a result, it suited a profit-minded Russian foreign policy better to promote European democratic political culture in Ukraine (Tsybaliuk 2012).⁵ So ideology apart, democratic systems seem to provide a better framework in which Russia is able to play a greater role in the political debate in Ukraine, to exercise its soft and economic power, to articulate its narrative in international affairs and defend its interests.

One can conclude that Russia's uneasy feelings about the democratic revolution are therefore a function of how Moscow perceives the outcomes of these revolutions. As long as Russia can maintain its strategic influence over the territory, it has no prejudice as to the form of government. Noticeably, after Russia's annexation of Crimea and creation of pro-Russian enclaves in the East of Ukraine, Moscow effectively recognised the newly elected centrist President Poroshenko. The state-controlled Russian media started to tone down the militant rhetoric against the 'Ukrainian Kiev junta' and stopped broadcasting press conferences with former President Yanukovich. Therefore, the dimension of the internal political system has currently ceased to generate a zero-sum political logic. At this stage, Moscow's interest now rests with a more democratic Ukraine. This interest will not push Russia to pursue active policies of democracy promotion. However, it will prevent Moscow from pursuing counter-democratic restorations. It is in this democratic landscape that Russia can promote its economic interest in Ukraine which will be discussed below.

The economic dimension

In the economic dimension, the zero-sum logic was generated by the fact that Russia and the EU were trying to open up Ukrainian markets to their economic actors and create more favourable conditions for trans-border trade and economic activities through DCFTA or through the Eurasian Customs Union with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus (ECU). Russia attached great importance to the Customs Union and Ukraine's accession to the block. President Putin personally advertised the benefits of the ECU for Ukraine several times and stressed the disadvantages of Ukraine's independent bargaining with both the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the EU. In particular, he stressed that the joint negotiations of the Customs Union would allow the bloc to receive import tariffs on the goods coming from the countries of the WTO which were twice as high as those granted to Ukraine during its bilateral negotiations with the WTO and that Ukraine could gain as much as US\$6–9 billion a year when acceding to the Customs Union.⁶ To make the prospect even more attractive, the Russian president went so far as to promise that Ukraine would be entitled to collect the export tax on all the volumes of gas and oil pumped by Russia and Kazakhstan through its territory. At the same time, Putin's close associates repeatedly stated that Ukraine's accession to DCFTA would close the door to the Customs Union for Ukraine.⁷ Russian experts produced various

⁵ Interview with an adviser in the 2nd Department of the CIS, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 12 June 2011, Moscow.

⁶ 'Putin rasskazal, chto dast Ukraine vstuplenie v Tamozhennyi Soyuz', *RIA Novosti*, 12 April 2011, available at: <http://ria.ru/tvpolitics/20110412/363791591.html>, accessed 20 January 2013.

⁷ 'Glaziev: Ukraina s assotsiatsiei s ES navsegda zakryvaet dveri v Tamozhenyi Soyuz', *Rosbalt*, 27 April, available at: <http://www.rosbalt.ru/ukraina/2013/04/27/1123413.html>, accessed 9 May 2013.

reports in which they tried to show the immediate advantages of the ECU and disadvantages of the DCFTA for Ukraine (Delcour & Wolczuk 2013, p. 191).

The EU has also contributed to generating zero-sum dynamics in the economic dimension. Firstly, the 'take it or leave it' approach adopted by the EU in negotiating DCFTA with the countries of the Eastern Partnership made impossible any adjustment which could address Russia's concerns at the expert level (Delcour & Wolczuk 2013, pp. 184–86). Secondly, EU officials made it clear that while a free trade area with Russia would be fully compatible with the DFCTA the accession of Ukraine to the Customs Union would make DFCTA with the EU impossible. On the eve of the EU enlargement in 2004, Moscow and Brussels engaged in numerous negotiations and addressed most of Russia's concerns ranging from a trade agreement with Poland and Bulgaria to a transit regime between Russia and the enclave of Kaliningrad. No similar meaningful trilateral discussion for addressing Russia's concerns was made in the case of Ukraine, which escalated the zero-sum logic in the economic dimension.

Broader Ukrainian society was clearly divided over the issue of integration with the EU with about 70% of the population in the west and the centre supporting it and 60% in the southeast voting for integration with Russia.⁸ At the same time, most Ukrainian governments and business interests have tried to escape this binary vision. Ukrainian governments have traditionally pursued a pragmatic economic foreign policy, which would reconcile free trade with Russia (CIS) and the EU. Even though Yanukovich and the Party of the Regions were often described as pro-Russian or as a Moscow proxy, there is strong evidence that their approach did not deviate from a pragmatic economic foreign policy.

Pro-Russian business and political elites represented in the government of Yanukovich had a number of strong concerns about the Customs Union and they supported association with the EU (Zarembko 2012). Their key concern was that the Customs Union would pave the way to the creation of supranational regulatory bodies to decide on the common tariff policy and on disputes and procedures. Despite the formal principle of consensual decision-making in the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission, it was clear that the weight of Putin's close associate and Russian representative Viktor Khristenko in this decision-making body was more than significant. In the existing political architecture of the Kremlin, Russian companies would have much stronger lobbying capacities, which would inevitably place Ukrainian businesses in an underprivileged position and eventually lead to these businesses being taken over by their stronger and more aggressive Russian counterparts.

Another reason for scepticism was a great disappointment about the deals reached between Kyiv and Moscow on gas discounts and basing rights for the Russian fleet in Crimea. In particular, after the Party of the Regions secured the prolongation of Russia's basing rights in Sebastopol, the discount on gas prices that Ukraine received from Moscow was considered less than symbolic.⁹ A growing number of gas pipelines constructed by Russia in order to bypass Ukraine became strong evidence that Russia did not want to share part of its gas rent with Ukraine, thus reducing Ukraine's transit potential and, consequently, its revenues from transit and export of the Russian gas. In this context, Moscow's offer to collect export tax on

⁸ 'Ukraine 2013 Public Opinion Poll Shows Dissatisfaction with Socio-Political Conditions, Press-Release of the International Foundation for Electoral System', International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 5 December 2013, available at: <http://www.ifes.org/news/ukraine-2013-public-opinion-poll-shows-dissatisfaction-socio-political-conditions>, accessed 15 August 2015.

⁹ Interview with a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and member of the Political Council of the Party of the Regions, 20 March 2012, Kyiv.

all gas pumped through Ukraine seemed too good to be true. The disappointment resulted in a number of practical measures that the Yanukovich government undertook in order to reduce Ukraine's gas dependence on Russia. Despite lack of transparency in the energy and electricity projects in the years 2010–2013, Ukraine switched many of its electricity-generating capacities from natural gas to coal. Kyiv also sought investors for constructing a liquefied natural gas terminal, signed an agreement with Shell for the extraction of shale gas, and looked for alternative gas delivery routes *via* Azerbaijan and Turkey (Azarov 2012; Storozhev 2012). Finally, although the risks of living and making business in developing markets offer high profits, Yanukovich and his business and political elite sought safe havens in the EU. Old Ukrainian business groups not only moved their headquarters and assets to Europe, they also pressured the government to create better conditions for the integration of Ukrainian businesses in Europe (Gavrilechko 2010). Pro-Russian as they were, President Viktor Yanukovich and his family developed business activities in European markets.

The above reasons were serious enough to outweigh all the potential benefits of accession to the Customs Union and opt for the DCFTA. Under Yanukovich, Ukraine continued to maximise its commitments selecting for adoption of as many EU technical norms as possible (Langbein & Wolczuk 2012, p. 867). The fact that Yanukovich appointed two of his closest associates, Head of the National Security Council Sergei Klyuev and Vice-Premier Sergei Arbuzov, to negotiate DCFTA and upgraded the status of the Ukrainian Ambassador to the EU to the level of the State Representative, demonstrates the importance of the European dimension in this case (Yanukovich 2013). The appointment of the highly respected centrist businessman and politician Petro Poroshenko to the position of the Minister of Economic Development and his skilful mitigation of the 'cheese war' between Russia and Ukraine in March 2012¹⁰ was another indication that Yanukovich was preparing to depoliticise the economic dimension and confine these relations to the technical domain. At the same time, Yanukovich was meticulous in removing any provision that would imply the supremacy of the Free Trade Area in the CIS over the DCFTA with the EU.¹¹

Certainly, Ukraine's decision to sign the DFCTA was sold to Russia and other international players as a pragmatic move aimed at linking Ukraine to the international market of 600 million comparatively rich Europeans. To save both Russia's and its own face when rejecting Russia's offer, Kyiv offered an alternative '3+1' formula which would allow Ukraine to maintain special status in relations with the customs union of Russian, Belarus and Kazakhstan given its special commitments to DFCTA. The alternative formula '3+1', essentially a Free Trade Area with the countries of the Customs Union, was the highest degree of integration to which the Ukrainian elite would be ready to accede. Another important concession from Kyiv was the offer to grant the Russian energy giant Gazprom preferential treatment in the privatisation of the Ukrainian regional energy distribution companies and their download capacities (Topalov 2011).

Despite all of Kyiv's efforts, Russia still viewed the EU–Ukraine trade deal as a threat to the Customs Union. President Putin repeatedly claimed that after the EU–Ukraine deal Russia would face a huge inflow of cheap European consumption goods. At the same time,

¹⁰The 'cheese war' was the period of embargo on the import of Ukrainian dairy products imposed by Russia in early 2012. Most noticeable of the banned goods were popular brands of Ukrainian cheese.

¹¹'Istochnik: Azarov podpisal vygodniy dlia Rossii dogovor o ZST v SNG bez soglasiya Yanukovicha', *Leby Bereg*, 4 April 2012, available at: http://lb.ua/news/2012/04/04/144279_istochnik_azarov_podpisal_vigodnyu.html, accessed 18 August 2015.

the Russian leader never specified what those cheap and high-quality European consumption goods were. More importantly, Putin repeatedly stressed that the EU–Ukraine deal was negotiated without taking note of Russia’s concerns. In the trade war that followed, Russia exerted pressure against those Ukrainian companies whose owners were close to President Yanukovich and could influence him (Pololovetsky 2013). With the growing budget deficit, looming gas crisis and complaints from major industries, Viktor Yanukovich conditioned his signing of the DCFTA on the allocation by the EU of significant financial support of €160 billion and invited Brussels and Moscow to start trilateral negotiations, an idea which Moscow immediately supported. These two proposals were rejected by the EU and stirred the first wave of protests of pro-European activists between 21 and 30 November 2013.

The economic dimension might look most conflict-prone because of the clashing preferences it encompassed. However, it should be noted that the first wave of protests in Kyiv and other major centres of Ukraine directly related to the EU–Ukraine trade deal did not provoke any significant civil conflict or geographical clash. It was mostly peaceful and art-related activities which generated no violence or politically relevant agenda. Protestors refused to give the floor to the opposition leaders, so neither the government nor pro-Russian oligarchs saw it as a threat. By 30 November 2013, most of the protests had come to an end and the protestors most likely would have ended up with nothing. As mentioned above, it was excessive violence by the riot police which triggered mass mobilisation and the radicalisation of the protests. Even though it might be argued that Ukrainians were fighting for European values of freedom of assembly and speech, this fight was only remotely related to the EU–Ukraine DCFTA agreement. To attribute to the economic dimension a causal power for the future events would mean to fall into a *post-hoc* fallacy.

Zero-sum logic in the economic dimension was not powerful enough to produce a conflict within Ukraine, but it was one of the factors that provoked the Russian invasion. It was, however, some specific economic interests that drove Russia to invade Crimea. As mentioned above, the Russian president had no clear idea of how Russian economic interests could be damaged by the EU–Ukraine DCFTA. It was rather the rejection of Russia’s desire to negotiate EU–Ukraine relations in a trilateral format that had a strong symbolic effect. The right to negotiate with the EU over various arrangements in Europe has been an important element of Russia’s great power identity. The rejection of Russia’s claim to negotiate over various, even minor, deals between Europe and the Eastern Neighbourhood challenged Russia’s great power status. This led to ‘geopoliticisation’ of EU–Ukraine trade issues in Moscow. The Russian side repeatedly described the DCFTA as a geopolitical plot and an attempt to squeeze Russia out from the post-Soviet space.¹² However insignificant for the eventual success of the protests, the visits to the EuroMaidan by the US Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, and the Republican Party politician, John McCain, contributed to further politicisation of Maidan in Moscow, which eventually led to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The subsequent events demonstrated that there were no specific economic concerns behind Russia’s complaints about the EU–Ukraine DCFTA. Firstly, when the newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed the EU–Ukraine DCFTA in July 2014, Russia’s response was merely rhetorical and not even aggressive. This indifference demonstrates that the DCFTA

¹² ‘Transcript of Remarks and Response to Questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at Brussels Forum 2009, Brussels’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 21 March 2009, available at: http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/3df9dc130029883ec325758b003a5b79?OpenDocument, accessed 15 August 2015.

per se did not pose any threat to the economic interests of Russia and the Eurasian Customs Union. Secondly, when Ukraine failed to put down quickly the rebellion in the southeast of Ukraine, Kyiv suggested organising a trilateral meeting in the format Ukraine–Eurasian Customs Union–EU. Russia immediately accepted this offer. At the Trilateral Meeting in Minsk on 23 August 2014, President Putin stressed the fact that the EU had refused to discuss the DCFTA was the reason for the deterioration of relations (Putin 2014). The absence of an economic rationale behind the crisis was confirmed by the statement of the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev who stressed that in fact the EU–Ukraine DCFTA would not harm the interests of Kazakhstan and, consequently the Eurasian integration.¹³ All the above suggests that Russia's harsh response to the EU–Ukraine DCFTA came mostly from the fact that Moscow had not been consulted before the negotiations.

It is noticeable that although President Poroshenko signed the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement right after his inauguration, Kyiv refrained from disrupting any multilateral negotiations with Russia on potential repercussions of the EU–Ukraine DCFTA for Russia. Although Russia imposed bans on some Ukrainian products this does not compare with the fully fledged trade war Russia waged against Ukraine in July and August 2013. There continues to be consensus between the Ukrainian government, businesses and society over the view that the Free Trade Area with Russia is compatible with the EU–Ukraine DCFTA. Therefore, despite initial claims about the zero-sum logic, Ukraine appears to be more inclined to accede to the DCFTA with the EU without committing itself to deeper and formal integration with Russia. This consensus seems to be currently accepted by Russia. The main hurdle to this process is the fact that a mere trade agreement acquired a strong symbolic meaning and was linked to great power politics and the security domain.

Foreign policy and the international security architecture: voluntary Finlandisation

The zero-sum dynamic in the domain of security should be considered within two triangles: NATO–Ukraine–Russia and EU–Ukraine–Russia. The comparison of the two triangles demonstrates that the Ukrainian elite and society at large are trying to find a compromise on international security.

The question of NATO has been controversial due to the fact that the Orange democratic elite saw Ukraine's speedy membership of NATO as a precondition for Ukraine's European integration whereas the Party of the Regions opposed these plans. Indeed, the Party of the Regions played an important role in blocking Ukraine's application to the NATO Membership Action Plan. But it would be wrong also to explain the negative image of NATO and the rejection of Ukraine's accession to the alliance simply by reference to the position of the Party of the Regions and the manipulation of the Russian intelligence services, although President Medvedev had implicitly acknowledged the contribution of Russian intelligence services to these developments (Medvedev 2009).

The main reason for not joining NATO was that Ukrainian society was reluctant to make hasty decisions on such sensitive issues as membership of multilateral defence alliances whether these are Russian-led or promoted by the West. This is especially the case when an

¹³ 'V Belarusii Nazarbaev vozrazil Putinu po assotitsatsii Ukrainy ni ES', *Odnako Newsline*, 21 August 2014, available at: <http://odnako.su/news/politics/-160372-v-belarusi-nazarbaev-vozzrazil-putinu-po-associacii-ukrainy-i-es/>, accessed 15 August 2015.

issue such as this is associated with notions of clandestine diplomacy or corruption. The incident of the secret letter of January 2008, which was signed by President Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Parliamentary Speaker Arseniy Yatsenyuk calling on NATO to accept Ukraine in the Membership Action Plan (NATO MAP) at the Bucharest summit, made it clear that Ukrainian society was unhappy about a hasty accession to the alliance. Apart from the Party of the Regions blocking the work of the Parliament on this for about two months, there was also public disapproval of the way in which this NATO MAP had been lobbied for. Additional scandals concerning the financing of a NATO-awareness campaign served to further undermine the population's support for NATO.¹⁴ The popular support for NATO in the period from 2006 to 2012 declined from about 16% to 12% (Razmukov Centre 2012). The signal from the society was clear: no hasty NATO accession. Thus, even the most committed Euro-Atlanticist Anatoliy Grytsenko had to accept that Ukrainian society was not ready to make a decision on membership in NATO and he publicly requested the President of Ukraine to withdraw the membership application (Grytsenko 2006, 2009). Consequently, the Ukrainian elite had to face the fact that Ukrainian society did not want NATO membership. This non-zero-sum consensus explains why the extension of basing rights in Crimea and the adoption of Ukrainian neutrality under the Party of the Regions did not provoke serious protests in Ukrainian society despite the fierce resistance of the Ukrainian parliamentary opposition.

Even Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian war in the southeast of Ukraine in 2014 did not reverse the trend. These developments certainly caused a significant change in public support for NATO: the popularity of NATO grew to about 40%. Many opposition parties and politicians such as, for example, Tymoshenko and Grytsenko, re-introduced the issue of NATO membership to the public debate. Despite the return of Euro-Atlanticist ideas, the presidential elections showed that the major centrist trend prevailed in Ukrainian politics. Petr Poroshenko ran for president with explicit pro-European rather than Euro-Atlanticist slogans. After the elections, Poroshenko repeatedly rejected the idea of accession to NATO on the grounds that it could ruin the country.¹⁵ The overall reluctance of NATO to provide tangible support to Ukraine deepened the understanding that NATO should not be considered as the security provider for Ukraine.

Speaking about Europe and the EU one can notice that the link between the EU and Ukrainian security has been eroded. Certainly, the idea of Europe and European norms and standards remains synonymous with the idea of normal prosperous development. But what is important is that in Ukraine's perception of the EU, especially in the security domain, the EU has started to lose its attractiveness. One of the reasons for this is that the political discourse of the Party of the Regions is based on the idea that Ukraine can become a European country only through its own growth and prosperity. The idea of national interests becomes dominant in foreign policy calculations. In 2011 Ukraine's alignment with the CFSP resolutions dropped (26 out of 44 in 2010) (European Commission 2011).

There is also one more reason for the Ukraine's disillusionment with the CFSP. It is the fact that the EU failed to stick to its CFSP commitments. One example is the half-hearted EU approach to the Transnistrian issue. Although in 2004 German diplomats exerted pressure on

¹⁴ Interview with a 2nd Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 11 June 2012, Kyiv. About US\$12 million allocated to several NATO awareness campaigns and embezzled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs further undermined the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration.

¹⁵ 'Question of Ukraine's membership of NATO may split country—Poroshenko', *Interfax Facts*, 2 April 2014, available at: <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/198839.html>, accessed 5 October 2015.

Ukraine to impose an effective ban on the exports of unregistered Transnistrian enterprises through Ukrainian territory, the EU then failed to stand by Moldova and Ukraine when Russia exerted pressure to lift the ban. Germany itself did not curtail its extensive collaboration with Transnistrian metallurgy plants. Neither did the EU always enforce the travel ban on the Transnistrian leadership. Europe's inability to exert pressure on Transnistria and Germany's separate great power deals with Russia caused serious disillusionment among Ukrainian policy-makers:

Yuschenko was ready to spoil relations with Russia and to host EUBAM.¹⁶ And what have we eventually got back from this? Merkel and Medvedev discuss Transnistria behind our back. Well, Medvedev can afford this, he is playing his own game. But Germany is supposed to display a certain solidarity and appreciation of our effort. Now, it plays with Russia because Russia sticks to its values and defends them. Maybe we should also become arrogant for the EU to start taking us seriously.¹⁷

With Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the Eastern Ukraine this disillusionment touched even the most convinced Europeanists. Brussels' refusal to provide Ukraine with military support, the piecemeal adoption of the economic sanctions against Russia and the deployment of the EU Assistance Mission with a limited budget and a very weak mandate have convinced Kyiv to reconsider its security approach. Within the logic of centrist consensus the Ukrainian president has followed the Finnish model. This is not to say that Ukraine has renounced its strategic goal to join the European security system. It rather means that Kyiv chose less provocative tactics, that is, it will refrain from strong symbolic steps, which could trigger escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian war. Within this logic, Ukraine will continue its cooperation with the EU in those fields where it does not inhibit Ukrainian interests, for example, Ukraine's participation in the EU operations in the Balkans, in the EU naval operation Atlanta, leasing of Ukrainian strategic aircraft to the EU (SALIS),¹⁸ collaboration in visa liberalisation, justice, security, border control, the fight against organised crime and drug trafficking. Ukraine will also maintain the EUBAM presence on the Ukrainian–Moldova border (European Commission 2011). At the same time, acknowledging the limitations of the EU's external action. In weighing the EU CFSP against its own national interests, Ukraine will abstain from some strong CFSP resolutions. For example, Kyiv will not exert any pressure against Belarus and will seek temporary alliances with the countries of broader Eurasia.

At the same time, Kyiv will pursue a long term strategy of increasing its low-profile military defence through practical cooperation with individual players of the Euro–Atlantic Community (for example Ukraine's application for the status of a non-NATO strategic ally of the USA, and development of close military collaboration with Poland, the Baltic states and Albania). These tactics will allow Ukraine to increase its defence capability without antagonising Russia. A senior Finnish diplomat stressed that President Poroshenko's tactic resembles that of Finland's President, Urho Kekkonen, who managed to develop Finland's relations with NATO without antagonising Russia (Nyberg 2014).

¹⁶ EUBAM—the EU Border Assistance Mission to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine—was established in response to the invitation of the two countries, calling for additional EU support for better border control. The mission was deployed on the whole Moldova–Ukraine border, including the border between Ukraine and the pro-Russian breakaway republic of Transnistria because the Moldovan border authorities were unable to be present there.

¹⁷ Interview with a 2nd Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 11 June 2012, Kyiv.

¹⁸ SALIS—Strategic Airlift Interim Solution.

The dimension of ideology: national identity, interpretations of history and the language

The conflict in the ideological dimension of the triangle is often analysed as a conflict over national identity, interpretations of history and the issue of Russian language. A well known Ukrainian has publicly linked the three issues above to the dimension of political practices by arguing that the Yanukovich government sought to weaken 'Ukraine's national identity as a major obstacle to their authoritarian dominance and replace it with a Russian–Soviet–East Slavonic identity, profoundly anti-Western and anti-liberal, that is well established in Russia and Belarus' (Riabchuk 2012, p. 445). That has been achieved by a pro-Russian political elite glorifying the Soviet past, vilifying Ukrainian nationalists and by narrowing the space for the Ukrainian language. On the other hand, Russia strengthened this link by arguing that the protests in Kyiv were led by fascist and Russophobic forces.¹⁹ At first sight the reports of the ultranationalist party *Svoboda* and a new radical group Right Sector (*Pravy Sektor*) that were leading the violent protests at Maidan seem to confirm this kind of interpretation. This section will deal with the fusion of these three concepts—national identity, interpretations of history and the language.

From an examination of the Ukrainian revolution and its consequences one can conclude that both above interpretations are reductionist for several reasons. First, the active participation of the ultranationalist parties in the violent protests in February 2014 has not resulted in their growing popularity in society more broadly. After the transfer of power of February–March 2014, these parties effectively lost their dominant position in the opposition movement. During the presidential election the leaders of the two ultranationalist radical parties, Oleh Tyahnybok (*Svoboda*) and Dmytro Yarosh (*Pravy Sektor*), obtained less than 2% of the votes.²⁰ Even in the conditions of Russian–Ukrainian conflict, neither of these ultranationalist parties managed to gain 5% support during the parliamentary elections in October 2014 and failed to secure a parliamentary presence.²¹ The decline of the Communist Party of Ukraine (*Komunistychna Partia Ukrainy*), the Party of the Regions and 'Tymoshenko's block', which relied on pro-Soviet or pro-Ukrainian nationalism respectively, as well as the ascent of several centrist parties, demonstrate that the expectations of Ukrainian public opinion turned from a confrontational to a reconciliatory paradigm.

This new 'reconciliatory' paradigm rejects the exclusivist policy choices of ethnic nationalism and envisages dialogue, negotiation and bargaining, features more characteristic of civic nationalism. For example, several new political forces such as the pro-president block Solidarity–Poroshenko (*Petra Poroshenko bloc*), Democratic Alliance (*Demokratychny Alians*), Civil Position (*Hromadianska Pozytisia*) and Self-Help (*Samopomich*), feature Russian-speakers from Donbas and Ukrainian-speaking activists from Western Ukraine in their electoral party lists. They also share more or less similar concerns of good governance, corruption and the economy. Most of these parties seek to conduct reforms of government institutions, the army, police and others, in order to reinstall the political process and the legitimacy of the state.

¹⁹ 'Vstrecha s chlenami fraktsiy politicheskikh parti v Gosudartsvennoi Dume', The Kremlin, 14 August 2014, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451>, accessed 15 August 2015.

²⁰ 'Ukraine Election for President', IFES Election Guide, 25 March 2014, available at: <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2338/>, accessed 15 August 2015.

²¹ 'Election for Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council)', IFES Election Guide, 26 October 2014, available at: <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2805/>, accessed 15 August 2015.

The composition of the Ukrainian government also confirms that the civic nationalist paradigm seems to prevail. A number of top figures in the current Ukrainian government are native Russian-speakers and represent the south and east of the country. President Poroshenko, himself, was born and raised in the Russian-speaking Odessa region (in the south of the country). Other examples include: the Russian-speaking Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov, who started his political career in the east of Ukraine in Kharkov; and the former Speaker of the Parliament and the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council Oleksandr Turchinov, who comes from the eastern Ukrainian regional centre of Dnepropetrovsk. In addition, a number of Russian-speaking expatriates easily received Ukrainian citizenship to start working in the Ukrainian executive. For example, former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has been appointed Governor of Odessa region and brought in a number of his close associates from Georgia and expatriates from Russia. A similar multi-ethnic composition of the legislature, judiciary and government bureaucracy demonstrates that the ruling political class is committed to a civic nationalist paradigm.

The war in Donbas provides a significant amount of evidence that undermines any potential link between language and alleged pro-Russian, non-democratic preferences. Even though the region has been an arena for an intense military conflict, the numbers show that the larger part of the Russian-speaking community of the region remains loyal to the Ukrainian state project. Although some polls showed that about 30% of the local population support the independence of Donbas, the number of those who would be ready to take arms and fight for an independent Donbas was tiny.²² The First Defence Minister of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic', the charismatic Russian officer Igor Girkin-Strelkov, had to admit that the whole Donbas region with a population of 10 million people produced fewer than 1,000 volunteers ready to fight against the 'fascist Kyiv junta' for the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic.²³ At the same time, 14 (out of 37) volunteer battalions, fighting against the secessionist forces and the Russian army, were created by the Russian-speaking population of the southeast of Ukraine.²⁴ Geographical evidence also suggests no clash between Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking territories. Despite Russia's support, the secessionist forces could expand their control over only half of Donetsk *oblast'* and one third of Luhansk *oblast'*, which is less than 10% of the territory of the Russian-speaking southeast of Ukraine.

While the government and the broader public support the civil nationalism paradigm, the major businesses seem to be divided. For example, some major industrialists in Donbas, such as the major donor to the Party of the Regions Rinat Akhmetov and the Head of the Parliamentary Faction of the Party of the Regions Aleksandr Efremov, tend to promote the narrative of conflict between the peaceful periphery (Donbas) and the extremist radical centre (Kyiv), and support the armed units of the secessionist movement. It is, however, difficult for this group of businessmen to mobilise significant popular support for four reasons. Firstly, they

²² 'Dinamika ideologicheskikh markerov', Sociology Group 'Rating', Kyiv, 27 April 2014, available at: <http://ratinggroup.com.ua/ru/products/politic/data/entry/13958/>, accessed 18 August 2015.

²³ 'Strelkov obratilsia k zhyteliam "DNR": rasskazal o dobrovoltsah iz RF i oruzhii', *UNIAN News*, 17 May 2014, available at: <http://www.unian.net/politics/919073-strelkov-obratilsya-k-jitelyam-dnr-rasskazal-o-dobrovoltsah-iz-rf-i-oruzhii.html>, accessed 17 August 2015. See also, 'Obraschenie Strelkova, Slaviansk', 17 May 2014, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M46S_AyaL3k, accessed 18 August 2015.

²⁴ 'Vony voyuyuti za Ukrainy: spysok batalioniv, iaky berut uchast v ATO', *Slovo i Delo*, 3 September 2014, available at: <http://www.slovoidilo.ua/articles/4543/2014-09-03/dobrovolcheskie-bataliony-kotorye-prinimayut-uchastie-v-vojne-na-vostoke.html>, accessed 18 August 2015.

have been heavily compromised both in Kyiv and the Russian-speaking regions by their close links with the Yanukovich government. Secondly, they repeatedly manipulated the 'centre-periphery' discourse in order to mobilise electoral support, but never managed to deliver on their promises. Eventually, this discourse was hijacked by more radical groups, both local and Russian proxies. As a result, the major businesses lost effective control over the rebels in the region. Thirdly, they are currently opposed by a group of other major industrialists from the region, like Ilike Ihor Kolomoisky and Sergiy Taruta, who suffered under Yanukovich and have reasons to support the current democratic regime. Fourthly, some of the formerly pro-Yanukovich and neutral oligarchs, such as a famous intermediary in numerous semi-transparent gas deals Dmytro Firtash, gave the support of the popular Inter-TV channel to the pro-Ukrainian cause. Therefore, the business elite of Ukraine seems to be divided, with a growing sympathy to a civic national identity.

Similarly, a reconciliatory approach to the divisive and conflictual interpretations of Ukrainian history seems to prevail in the broader Ukrainian society. The pro-Ukrainian narrative victimises Ukrainians and vilifies the Soviet past. The pro-Soviet narrative criminalises Ukrainian nationalism and glorifies the Soviet past. The reconciliatory trend seems to relativise both of them. One of the reasons why the society managed to escape from the conflicting discourse is that both narratives were heavily compromised. The pro-Ukrainian narrative was undermined when nationalist leaders Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko failed the Orange revolution by implementing ineffective policies, becoming involved in corruption, and personal quarrels. The pro-Soviet discourse was undermined after the corruption scandals with its main producers, the Communist Party and the Party of the Regions. This created favourable conditions for reconciliatory meta-narratives. Several examples of such reconciliation between the two parts of Ukrainian society were some highly popular TV shows, during which the high school and university students from the west and the east of the country discussed controversial issues of World War II and the role of Ukrainian nationalism. Broadcast in prime time, these shows were proclaimed by the audience as a model of tolerance for Ukrainian society (Chapai 2011).²⁵

This reconciliatory meta-narrative, which emerged in the broader society, had a knock-on effect on the political elites. This change took place not because of the altruism of the Ukrainian political class, but rather the policy of historical reconciliation has most likely gained ground among various political forces in Ukraine because it has become clear that any party trying to play one part of the country against the other is unlikely to win significant electoral support. Elections are won by those parties that can attract a critical mass of voters in one of the ideologically extreme regions, either the nationalist West or the pro-Russian southeast, and gain some votes in the politically moderate, less ideological Central Ukraine. Therefore, any political forces which try to stir nationalist fanaticism either in Western or Eastern Ukraine are doomed to fail. This is why the Ukrainian political class refused to make a choice between the pro-Soviet Russian narrative and the pro-Ukrainian narrative, and effectively chose a post-modern European meta-narrative.

A vivid example of how Ukrainian society departed from the exclusivist conflictual paradigms of the Soviet and nationalist interpretations and adopted a reconciliatory approach has been the debate which evolved around the celebration of the Soviet Victory Day during

²⁵ 'Svoboda Slova', *Shuster Live* television talk show, 8 May 2011, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWgzfT4cW_M, accessed 18 August 2015.

the years 2011–2013. On 9 May 2011 Ukraine witnessed reprehensible scenes of clashes which took place in the western part of the country between those who came to commemorate the Victory Day and the local Ukrainian nationalists. After this event, the wider public which participated in polls and public debates, did not take sides either with pro-Soviet internationalists, or with the Ukrainian nationalists, but expressed their indignation that the president, Parliament and police allowed violence to happen on that day.²⁶ Noticeably, even supporters of Ukrainian nationalism expressed their indignation at the fact of violence, rather than with the commemoration of the Soviet Victory Day.

A broader societal condemnation has pushed the ultranationalist forces, like *Svoboda*, to moderate their position. A year later, Soviet Victory Day was accompanied more by symbolic and rhetorical stand-offs in which all parties were trying to stress the non-violent character of their actions. This change demonstrates that Ukraine is gradually making a more European choice in the domain of ideology. Indicatively, the spokesman of *Svoboda* in its stronghold west Ukrainian city of Lviv, Markian Lopachak, stressed:

Our community has proved that Lviv is a European city, which shares an international approach to commemoration of the victims of WWII. We can see the outcomes of our outreach and information campaigns. . . . Despite all the efforts of the regime, our community did not yield to provocations and demonstrated complete indifference to the totalitarian Soviet symbols and banners.²⁷

The following year, on 9 May 2013, ‘pro-Russian’ President Viktor Yanukovich almost echoed the words of his predecessor Ukrainian-nationalist President Viktor Yushchenko and called for national peace, dialogue and reconciliation.²⁸ The trend prevailed during the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014. President Poroshenko called all Ukrainians to respect the rights of their compatriots to worship different heroes.²⁹ Trying to address major social concerns, even the most radical-leading political parties have tended to criticise the Soviet past mostly for the inefficiency of Soviet bureaucracy and economy while leaving other issues out of the debate (Lyashko 2014).

Similarly to the government and the broader society, Ukrainian business elites have demonstrated that they have chosen a ‘reconciliatory’ paradigm. On major Ukrainian TV channels, documentaries about the Ukrainian national struggle alternate with Soviet-style films about World War II. Leading industrialists prefer not to take sides with one or other narrative. One could predict that most likely Ukraine will not ‘criminalise’ its Soviet past, as happened in Poland and the Baltic states. The fact that the Ukrainian government, elites and society opted for tolerance and the reconciliation of two histories—the Soviet and nationalist—does not make Ukraine an accomplished nation if judged against the standards of Central

²⁶ ‘Opros: Bolshynstvo Lvovian schiatyut shto v sobytiyah 9 Maia vinovny pro-rossiyskie sily’, *Korrespondent*, 2 June 2011, available at: <http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/1224522-opros-bolshinstvo-lvovyan-schitayut-chto-vinovnymi-v-sobytyah-9-maya-yavlyayutsya-prorossiyskie-sily>, accessed 18 August 2015.

²⁷ ‘“Svoboda” radie scho ne dopustyla shabashu u Lvovi. Ale prapor zabrala’, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 9 May 2013, available at: <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2013/05/9/6989564/>, accessed 12 May 2013.

²⁸ ‘Yanukovich prizval isktati puti primirenia mezhdru vsemi storonami-uchastnikami Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny’, *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 9 May 2011, available at: http://zn.ua/POLITICS/yanukovich-prizval-iskat-puti-primireniya-mezhdru-vsemi-storonami-uchastnikami-vtoroy-mirovoy-voyny-121930_.html, accessed 17 August 2015.

²⁹ ‘Promova Prezydenta Petra Poroshenko na inavguratsii’, *TSN*, 7 June 2014, available at: <http://tsn.ua/politika/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-petra-poroshenka-na-inavnuratsiyi-povniy-tekst-353552.html>, accessed 17 August 2015.

European nations. This does not mean, however, that the country will remain in Russia's embrace. This trend for tolerance and reconciliation demonstrates rather that Ukraine has stepped out from the 'conflict-generating' trajectory and that Ukrainians are not different from Spaniards who have reconciled around the heritage of Franco or Italians who can have their own disagreements about Mussolini, but do not let them turn into violence.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the discussion about the problem of the Russian language and its status. This issue seems to have lost its social significance because it has been discussed too often and has become overly politicised. In mid March 2012, President Yanukovich stated that he would upgrade the status of the Russian language to the status of the second state language. This statement, which would have caused a controversy a few years earlier, hardly produced any effect (Ivzhenko 2013). Sociologists argue that the Russian language has lost its potential to mobilise support (Mishchenko 2012b). It seems that President Yanukovich and his entourage realised this and were not particularly happy when the two significant deputies of the Party of the Regions, Sergei Kivalov and Vadim Kolesnichenko, placed this issue on the agenda of public debate, in the form of a law on regional languages. These attempts obviously did more harm than good to the image of the Party of the Regions. The Russian-speaking population met these moves with scepticism, because the card was repeatedly used by the Party of the Regions. Centrists brought a reasonable argument that proper implementation of all the provisions of the law would result in every village and community proclaiming its own regional language not only Russian, but also, for example, Romanian, Hungarian and Bulgarian. That, as centrists argued, would undermine the state institutions and even basic communication between the central and local authorities. As a result of this law, a considerable section of moderate Ukrainian-speaking voters, who could potentially vote for the Party of the Regions, moved to the right, to the Ukrainian nationalists. According to media accounts the authors of such controversial legislation were not promoted in the electoral party lists (Kondratieva 2012), and some other significant deputies from the Party of the Regions publicly apologised for derogatory statements about the Ukrainian language (Samokhvalova 2012).

Further developments with the controversial law about the status of the minority languages demonstrated the prevalence of the centrist paradigm. When, after the collapse of the Yanukovich regime, the new government and the nationalist forces mobilised support to abolish the controversial law and revoke the special status of the Russian language, Acting President Turchinov did not hesitate to veto the bill, abolishing the controversial law. Later on, the newly elected President Poroshenko confirmed the special status of the Russian language. He delivered part of his inaugural speech in Russian and even launched Russian-language news programmes on the national TV channels. Overall, the leading political forces seem to agree not to politicise the question of the Russian language. Most popular parties that support President Poroshenko, his close political ally Vitaliy Klychko and his party *Udar*, the Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko (*Radykalna Partia Oleha Lyashka*), the Civil Position, and Democratic Alliance, prefer not to state any specific political position on the Russian language or support the promotion of the languages of national minorities. Obviously, the removal of the language issue from the political agenda does not imply it has been explicitly resolved and will never re-appear in the future. But it is important that despite their ethnic differences and language preferences, both the Russophones and the Ukrainians seem to seek reconciliatory solutions and mostly reject the idea of violence in bi-communal relations, which is eventually a European paradigm.

Conclusions

Placed in the overlapping gravitation field of Russia and the EU, Ukrainian government, society and business elites are looking for ways to find a balance between their own interests (sometimes even survival), Europe's power of attraction and Russia's influence. As the above analysis has shown, the trajectory of Ukraine in each dimension is shaped by the balance of preferences of main factors of social order. As a result, in those dimensions where at least two out of three factors find the attractive power of the EU stronger than that of Russia, Ukraine opts for a European choice. However, in other dimensions no equilibrium has been found so far.

This article has examined the Ukraine–Russia–EU triangle from the perspectives of societal practices rather than from the point of view of formal institutions. Drawing on this approach, it can be concluded that Ukraine is gradually moving to the European path of development. Broader Ukrainian society raises the issues of social equality and fair play and elites try to establish a predictable and safe environment. Lame authoritarianism, rigged parliamentary elections in October 2012, combined with ill-implemented neo-liberal reforms, corruption and inefficient governance stirred public resentment against the Ukrainian version of Russian authoritarianism and led to the democratic revolution in Ukraine in 2014. The fear of some oligarchs for their future and the defection of numerous members of the pro-Yanukovich Party of the Regions after the mass killing of people in Kyiv resulted in a smooth transition of power from Yanukovich to a new government. The article has also demonstrated that Russia's uneasy feeling about the democratic revolutions is a function of how Moscow perceives the outcomes of these revolutions.

In the economic dimension, even under the Yanukovich government, major societal actors agreed that the country should sign the EU–Ukraine DCFTA. In 2013 and 2014 Moscow decided to change the balance of preferences and exerted strong pressure on the Ukrainian government and businesses. As a result, the Yanukovich government backed by Ukrainian industries, decided to start bargaining and to postpone the signing. This article has shown that although these developments in the economic dimension (the postponement of the signing, rallies in support of the EU–Ukraine DCFTA) were not objectively linked to the dimension of political practices (the Ukrainian democratic revolution), Moscow construed these two events as a part of one plot, aimed at squeezing Russia out of its traditional sphere of influence and depriving it of the status of great power. Given that, Moscow decided to resort to its traditional great power tools, such as an annexation of territories (Crimea) and creation of internal conflicts (Donbas). By annexing Crimea and creating conflict in Donbas, Russia effectively undermined its objective economic interests and its authority among the partners in the Eurasian Economic Community and in the international arena. This behaviour reveals a strong link between the economic dimension and the dimension of international security. This suggests that quite often the subjective self-perception of one country may prevail over its cost–benefit considerations.

Although Moscow has linked the economic and political dimensions together and decided to act in the military security dimension, in order to prevent further Ukraine's integration with the West, Kyiv keeps trying to decouple the two above dimensions from the military political one. Kyiv seeks to avoid a zero-sum game in the dimension of international security. Its major entrepreneurs refrain from expressing strong Euro–Atlanticist views. Although there is a growing popularity of NATO among the broader Ukrainian public, it is still a

relative minority. The majority of Ukrainians and President Poroshenko himself still maintain a centrist paradigm and refrain from strong symbolic steps which could provoke a further Russian response. At the same time, the country seeks strong *de facto* cooperation with the most active NATO members and develops low profile defence capabilities.

In the dimension of ideology, Ukrainians seem to be moving away from the conflictual paradigm. An inclusive civic national identity is being developed. The question of Russian language is losing its political significance. Having experienced strong polarisations around ideological issues, Ukrainians appear to be developing immunity against political and ideological extremes. The decline of the extreme right political parties (both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian) indicates the emerging centrist consensus. Even if national consensus about the interpretations of history is unlikely to be achieved in the mid-term, the Ukrainian ruling class, elite and society tend to learn from their own mistakes and to avoid societal violence around history. Despite certain support in Donetsk and Crimea for secession from Ukraine, the Russian-speaking community largely ignored the calls of Russian leaders to join the fight for independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The geographical area controlled by these entities remains very small. On the other hand, the number of Russian-speakers fighting for the territorial integrity of Ukraine corresponds to the proportion of the Russian-speaking population in the country. Thus, one can conclude that Ukraine is moving to a European path of development by reaching broader consensus on less controversial issues; by relativising some more controversial issues, or by refraining from some actions that can generate zero-sum logic in the EU–Russia context.

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